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ABSTRACT

This paper provides advice to college and university administrators on issues and problems associated with the assessment and documentation of institutional effectiveness, in light of the current Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) criteria for institutional self-evaluation. Administrators need to: (1) get the attention of high-level decision-makers at their institution; (2) not just throw money at the problem; (3) avoid setting themselves up for failure by using poor definitions; (4) avoid assigning the project to their institutional research office; (5) avoid stopping the process once they get the results; (6) avoid getting lost in small numbers; (7) avoid a total focus on tests or numbers; (8) not try to hide issues; and (9) avoid using the SACS self study as a promotional document for the institution. (MDM)

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Problems in Assessing and Documenting Institutional Effectiveness

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January 1994

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Issues/Problems in Assessing and Documenting Institutional Effectiveness

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Virtually all so-called "problems" are relational in nature; that is, the intensity of the problem is only meaningful with respect to the context in which the problem occurs. To speak about "problems" or issues with respect to assessing institutional effectiveness, it may be helpful for a moment to describe the contexts from which institutional effectiveness measures are emerging.

Historically, institutions have been measured by outside agencies, lay citizens, and their respective legislators if they are public institutions or by benefactors if they are private institutions, on a variety of criteria, some of which are vague and personal; others of which are more specific and public. With respect to formal evaluations from discipline areas, i.e., the National League for Nursing, the American Medical Association, or the American Psychological Association, departments and divisions within a college or university have usually been held to a fairly systematic and routine set of criteria which have emerged within the discipline over time. With respect to traditional (process) institutional effectiveness measures as developed by accrediting agencies such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), these for the most part were relatively easy to accumulate and document.

The presentation of data for a SACS reaccreditation study prior to 1985 amounted to an enormous effort once a decade to gather together already available information, e.g., number of faculty who have master's and doctoral degrees, the ratio of these faculty to students, the number

* Adapted from an earlier speech.

of library books, documentation of fiscal responsibility, and other like information. The important difference between the collection of traditional data describing institutional resources and the current expectations of the SACS *Criteria* are: (1) that the new information being sought is not something that can be gathered only once a decade, (2) the responsibility is left to the collective professional judgments of college personnel — not SACS, (3) the *Criteria* places a heavy emphasis on documenting institutional effectiveness. The institution is expected to devote energy and resources to regularly gather information which in all probability was not routinely, systematically, and publicly gathered by the institution prior to the initiation of the new SACS statements. It may be that some institutions collect information reflective of student outcomes, but there are many colleges and universities which have this information available only sporadically and then rarely in relation to the stated goals of the university or college. Thus, the major difference and the essential core of issues from which problems may arise is the requirement that something additional be undertaken by the college or university to meet the expectations of the Southern Association. This "something" is expounded in the *Resource Manual* that was developed to accompany the SACS *Criteria* publication. The Resource Manual basically attempts to elaborate some of the methodologies by which issues might be addressed with regard to assessing institutional effectiveness.

However, there is little focus in either the *Criteria* or the *Resource Manual* on concomitant problems associated with implementing the programs necessary to accomplish an assessment of institutional effectiveness as envisioned by SACS. With these brief contextual comments, I will now move to address specific issues/problems which can be anticipated in the assessment of institutional effectiveness based on outcomes measures.

1. Get the attention of high-level decision-makers at your college or university.

This can be a severe impediment if not accomplished. Although many of us who have been directly involved with the *SACS Criteria* for several years believe that the issues are clear-cut and that colleges and universities should be moving with all deliberate speed to implement institutional effectiveness programs, I think that there are a reasonably large number of institutions where the chief administrative officers have yet to address seriously the new expectations for assessment of institutional effectiveness by which their reaccreditation will be evaluated. This view is strengthened by the large number of recommendations given by Visiting Teams in the general area of institutional effectiveness.

2. Don't just throw \$\$ at the problem.

This second problem relates to resource allocation. I believe there needs to be a fine balancing act between an expenditure of resources which would so heavily burden the institution that it would be impractical to implement, and, on the other hand, a total neglect of resource needs. As a fairly mundane example, let me point out that the follow-up of graduates into employment as a measure of institutional effectiveness related to student outcomes need not be an every year event with every student. To burden the institution with such a heavy demand would require more outlay of resources than is needed to answer the question. Rather, a sample of students followed up every second or third year would probably answer the question sufficiently well. Although this is a minor example, I think the general notion of trying to sample and to minimize expenditures of resources and efforts is extremely important.

3. Don't set yourself up for failure by using poor definitions.

From a conceptual level, this may be the most serious of all of the problems facing us in the area of institutional effectiveness measures. The problem that I have in mind is one of determining reasonableness with regard to outcomes measures. This is a particularly sensitive area and one which I believe gets all too little attention in the planning stages.

As you begin to implement outcomes measures, it becomes almost immediately apparent that the game can be won or lost based on how one determines what a reasonable outcome measure is. Let me try to give a few examples. With regard to improving student retention rates, one could immediately set the institution up for success by saying that we hope to improve the graduation rate to 20% of the entering freshmen over a three-year period. For most colleges, this is a very low-level outcome measure and is probably already attained by most colleges. On the other hand, you could set your institution for immediate failure by building in a goal to achieve a 100% graduation rate of all first-time-in-college students. What is a reasonable goal to establish for your college with respect to graduation rates? In many instances, this issue is addressed by speaking of improvement over already existing achievement levels, and indeed one can anticipate moving from e.g. an historical 40% graduation rate after five years to a 45% graduation rate two years hence, to a 50% graduation rate five years hence. However, the same concept is involved with regard to improvement as it is to establishing goals initially; i.e., what is a reasonable rate of improvement and over what period of time should this be expected?

4. Don't assign the project to your institutional research office.

I believe a more subtle problem that awaits us has to do with where the task is assigned and carried out. If the task for assessing institutional effectiveness is assigned to institutional research at your college or university this could in itself be a problem, because then the entire project is assumed to occur outside of teaching faculty responsibility. In my view, institutional effectiveness measures should be directed and controlled by faculty and/or those persons most affected by the particular measure. That is to say, if the measures have to do with financial aid operations, then, obviously, the staff in financial aid should determine the outcome measures and the processes to achieve them, rather than directing this task to the institutional research office. They should as well be involved with the collection and interpretation of the information. The point here is to emphasize the need for a broad-based and rather firm commitment on the part of all who will be affected and not to leave this as simply another assignment with institutional research, because then the basic intent of the *Criteria* and the emphasis on institutional effectiveness measures will be undermined.

5. Don't stop when you get the results into a report.

The focus of Section III of the *Criteria* is on getting back the information from studies conducted during the Self Study process in a manner that affects decision-making. It appears clear both conceptually and in terms of the requirements from the *Criteria* that the intent of self study is undermined if we do not attend to the findings in addressing curriculum changes and addressing methods of improving student learning as a result of analysis of the findings. Moreover, these findings need to be articulated to teaching

faculty who are the primary interactors with students. It is quite easy, given all of the discussions and the numbers and the problems with politics, to forget that students remain our primary concern, the primary focus for all of these introspective efforts.

6. Don't get lost in small numbers.

Sometimes, studies conducted under the umbrella of outcomes assessment are communicated in a series of reports in which the basic issues get lost in tests of significance. By the way, that may be a good reason to keep the assignment of institutional effectiveness out of the institutional research office. The idea is to focus on broad questions which are meaningful for parents, for older students, for students newly out of high schools, or for your boards of trustees. For example, to what extent are students who arrive on the doorsteps of your college or university receiving an educational experience for which they signed on. Another broad question has to do with the following: are there any particular groups of students who appear to exit the university experience earlier than others? These are the kinds of broad issues that parents, potential students, and boards of trustees members want to know answers to and the kinds of questions that can be addressed and presented without moving into arcane uses of statistics. Case studies are an extremely important methodological process for getting information and should not be forgotten as you undertake your studies.

7. Avoid a total focus on tests and numbers.

Many of us continue to remind ourselves and our colleagues that qualitative outcomes are at least as important, if not more important, than quantitative

measures and we need to continue to ask questions which can be answered qualitatively.

8. Do not try to hide issues.

As a Visiting Team member for SACS, it has been my experience that few major issues that are troublesome can be hidden. Moreover, to do so undermines the purpose of the Self Study. In the written report be as forthcoming as possible regarding areas in which the *Criteria* are not met, and put forward the institution's plans for corrective action.

9. Do not use this self study as a promotional document for the university.

The intent of the Self Study is a thorough analysis of the entire institution in an effort to improve the educational process for students, faculty, and staff. It is inevitable that in undergoing this analysis, any modern institution is going to discover areas which need revision and areas of functioning which need to be discarded. Criticisms of current management practices are often common. Each of these should be brought to light in a professional manner and recommendations made by the Self Study process for self-improvement. There will be areas of strength in which the institution may rightly take pride and these might be noted, but keep in mind that self-promotional activities of a public relations nature should take place in a forum other than the Self Study process.

Setting forth these issues/problems and guidelines for avoiding them is an attempt to encourage critical examination of potential pitfalls as you move forward in the process of self-examination to achieve educational improvement.